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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the concerns about the violence in U.S. public schools and provides suggestions for preventing school violence by increasing the attention that children with behavioral problems receive. Some strategies for reform are: (1) listen to the problems of children; (2) increase the effectiveness of the programs designed to help children; (3) teach coping and social skills; (4) shift more resources to prevention; (5) learn to identify and help seriously troubled children; (6) develop a model for crisis management; and (7) develop alternative schools. (EMK)

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ED 424 503

Remarks as prepared for delivery by
U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley

Safe and Drug Free Schools Conference

Washington, D.C.,
June 9, 1998

RECONNECTING WITH OUR CHILDREN AND KEEPING THEM SAFE

I want to thank all of you for coming to this important conference and for your personal commitment to the children of America. I know that each and every one of you is making a sacrifice to do the jobs you do. That, to my way of thinking, is the very essence of patriotism and what it means to be a good American.

Yesterday, I went to New York at the request of the President and joined Attorney General Reno, General McCaffrey and several other cabinet members as the President gave a very important anti-drug speech at the United Nations. The essence of his message was very simple -- the United States will remain unrelenting in its efforts to stem the use and abuse of drugs. It is a message that needs to be heard again and again.

There is another message that our young people need to hear again and again and that is this -- please, young Americans, please listen to me -- violence is not the solution to any problem that you may have.

The recent wave of terrible killings in Springfield, Oregon; Edinboro, Pennsylvania; Jonesboro, Arkansas; West Paducah, Kentucky; Pearl, Mississippi, and other places have struck a nerve and sent a shudder of doubt throughout our great country.

Yet, I know that America's schools are among the safest places to be on a day-to-day basis because of your good work. Ninety percent of our schools are free of serious violent crime. We have millions of young people who are healthy and happy and want to learn.

I've met them and so have you. There are so many good kids all over America who really are the hope of the future. They are energetic, smart, creative, and they truly seek a moral dimension to their lives.

But as long as this society continues to glorify violence, continues to make it easy for young people to get guns -- and as long as we continue to hide our heads in the sand or fail to reach out when a young person is truly troubled -- we will have to confront tragedies like Springfield and Jonesboro.

So we need to stop and think hard about what we can do to help our children grow up safely and learn to reject violence.

I am troubled by the fact -- and this is something that I have said again and again -- that so many young people in America are growing up

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disconnected. They are growing up almost alone. And then we wonder why some adults fear our own children. Last year a Public Agenda report stated that over 60 percent of American adults view young people in the negative.

This is a rather extraordinary finding but there it is -- another sign that there is a disconnection here that we need to address. So where do we start? At the turn of the century, the American philosopher, Henry Adams in writing his autobiography, defined what he called the "law of acceleration." He wondered whether people would have the capacity to keep up with what he called the "velocity of change" in the 20th century.

Here at the end of the century, I have my own concern. I wonder if, in our haste to keep up with the velocity of change, we are forgetting those things that are most essential to our children: giving them that deep, abiding sense of trust, guidance and security that tells them that they are truly loved, cared about and respected.

In countless conversations, Americans are wondering what is going on with our children. My answer to them is that our children reflect who we are as a people. We seem to have a love affair with violence and it will take a sea change in our culture to move away from this thinking.

When 6,000 young people are killed every year with a gun, when 5,000 young people commit suicide every year, when over a million young people run away from home every year, when almost a half million young people drop out of school every year, and when hundreds of thousands of young people get into drugs and alcohol and tobacco and just mess up their lives, can we truly say we are a child-centered society, that we are giving all due attention and concern to their upbringing?

When we see children killing children, can we say that we have listened to them with all due care? Violence is a language, a sound that always captures our attention but always too late. This is why "connectedness" is so important.

Reconnecting With Our Children

Last year, the Journal of the American Medical Association published the results of a survey of 90,000 young people concerning high risk behavior that included face-to-face interviews with more than 12,000 teenagers in their homes. This survey was one of the most comprehensive that has ever been done and it went to great lengths to reach young people on sensitive subjects such as drug use, sexuality, violence and suicide, even allowing the young people to key their answers into a laptop computer to protect their confidentiality. The results were remarkable in their simplicity and depth.

The survey indicated that young people who felt connected to their parents and schools were less likely to engage in high risk behavior. As Doctor Robert Blum, the survey director, stated, "kids who feel connected to school are more likely to feel connected at home, and kids who perform better in school are the same ones who are told at home that school is important."

This is why every school in the nation has to actively engage and encourage parents and do everything possible to mitigate the time crunch

of daily life so parents stay connected to their children. We need to urge parents to slow down their lives and as educators we must slow down our lives as well.

We must commit ourselves to one very basic idea: that every child in America in a school has a positive and caring relationship with at least one adult. This simply has to be the new standard we set for our nation's schools and communities. This is something that Paul Schwarz, our principal-in-residence, talked to you about yesterday.

Yes, there are innumerable obstacles to reaching this goal. And, yes, many seasoned educators will immediately say that there is no time, that teachers and administrators are already stretched too thin. But the goal of having every child in a school be connected to some caring adult is not unrealistic.

I have visited mega-schools that have become schools-within-schools. I have visited charter schools, career academies, and schools that have created family units within larger schools. I have visited schools that actively involve parents and senior citizens. And I have visited schools in drug-infested neighborhoods where the entire community makes sure that children come and go to school safely.

The secret of success at all of these schools is the willingness of teachers, parents and the entire community to go to great lengths to make sure that every child and every family feels connected and valued.

Congress Must Act

This is why the many programs that President Clinton has sent to the Congress -- from reducing class size to school construction to expanding after-school programs -- need to be seen as a direct help to those of you on the front line. Congress needs to stop worrying about politics and start passing legislation that will make a difference in the lives of our children.

Our prisons are full of high school dropouts who cannot read and that is one reason why funding the America Reads Challenge is so important. Yet, Congress continues to dilly dally and dawdle. And just think about how many young people we might help and get on the right track if they were connected to a young college student mentor as part of our High Hopes program that would link middle schools to colleges. I urge the Congress to act on all of these important pieces of legislation.

I single out for special attention the President's proposal to fund 1,300 drug and violence prevention coordinators to serve 6,500 of our nation's middle schools. When Congress goes home in October, this piece of legislation -- indeed all the pieces of legislation that I have just mentioned -- needs to be on the President's desk for his signature.

And I will tell you why. I visit 60 to 70 schools a year. I see the best schools and the most run down schools and all kinds of schools in between. I see them all. I talk to teachers and principals, the counselors and the parents. I try to be a good listener. I know that when I come for a visit, the school staff wants to tell me two things: what they are accomplishing and what truly worries them.

As I make my visits, I detect a growing sense of urgency. The message I

hear again and again is that schools are being asked to "detox" young people from the glorification of violence and an easy acceptance of drugs, and to sensitize children about the value of life itself. Schools are being asked to pick up the pieces.

Schools are being asked to teach young people basic coping and social skills from anger management to cooperation, and sometimes educators are finding themselves at their wits' end.

A few days ago, I read a small news item about how a teacher had been attacked by four girls at a school who demanded that the teacher turn on the tasteless "Jerry Springer Show" in lieu of a documentary. Have we come to that?

My friends, we need to recognize that ending the violence and drug abuse is not simply a family nor a school problem. As PTA president Lois Jean White said last week, "it is America's problem." And, I would add, it is every community's problem as well. This is why we cannot let this summer slip by without planning ahead for the next school year. Now is the time to build community support for our nation's schools.

This is why this speech will be the first in a series of events that I will participate in to suggest some practical and urgent steps we can take to help in your work. To that end, I am announcing a series of action steps that the Administration will begin to take this summer to encourage a public dialogue and to help you make our schools even safer places to learn.

Listen to Our Children

First, the Attorney General and I will meet this summer and during the next school year with young people to talk directly with them regarding violence and drugs. We can't begin to end the violence unless we reach out to our young people, truly listen to their voices, and tune in to what they are really trying to say. And we must make them part of the solution.

Again and again in the aftermath of the tragedies like Springfield and Jonesboro we are told that other children thought trouble was coming. So we need to stop and listen to our young people and build those levels of trust that allow them to talk to us when they are worried and fearful.

Effective Programs

We can't begin to talk about improving the safety of our nation's schools unless we tighten up our own programs to make sure that they are research-based and have met the highest standards. This is why we are putting into place Principles of Effectiveness to re-direct our own Safe-and Drug Free School Program.

We have to do a much better job of making sure that what we are doing is effective. There is a science of prevention and we need to use it. This is why Congress should act with dispatch and approve the President's request to target $125 million to communities with strong prevention initiatives.

We also need to recognize that teaching young people coping and social

skills that allow them to turn away from violence and drugs can take many forms. Many of you are familiar with the wonderful work of Dr. James Comer at Yale University, whose program connects schools and communities. Dr. Gil Botvin of Cornell University Medical College has a Life Skills Program that has proved effective. I also know that many schools are using character education, peer mediation, conflict resolution, and the establishment of student run religious clubs as ways to help and encourage young people through turbulent times.

Shifting More Resources to Prevention

Third, we need to rethink and redirect how and where we spend our resources. When it comes to preventing violence, we need to shift some of our resources from the back end to the front end.

About a month ago I met with school security chiefs from the 30 major cities. Some of these school chiefs looked liked former football linebackers. Yet their message was anything but punishing. To a person, they spoke about the need to stop school overcrowding, to shift more resources to elementary school, and to hire more counselors.

They urged me as I urge you today to develop prevention strategies at the elementary school level. As one security chief told me, "every third grade teacher can tell you which child is already in trouble and headed down the wrong road." This is clearly true if they are teaching only 15 to 18 children in a class and can give some individual attention to each child.

This is why I join Attorney General Reno in saying that it is a "serious mistake" for both the House and the Senate to be developing juvenile justice legislation that sets aside no real funding for delinquency prevention, for truancy prevention, for after-school programs and for mentoring programs. These are the very programs that you and I know can be so effective in stopping violence from occurring in the first place.

Early Warning

Fourth, the Department of Education and the Department of Justice, working with the National Association of School Psychologists and other experts, will develop a framework to help teachers and principals understand early on when a child is truly troubled and the steps they can take to get help. This early warning guide, which will include important ways to prevent violence and deal with aggressive behavior, will be ready in the early fall.

Now, we need to be very cautious about the idea of sorting out our children and labeling them. In my opinion, too many young people are already being sorted out in our schools and too often this approach to education has been been harmful to minority youth.

At the same time, however, we need to recognize that research does exist that can help teachers, principals, and parents understand those early warning signs that define those few young people who are truly troubled. It takes great courage for a teacher or a parent or a preacher or a coach to confront a troubled child. But this is something that we must do in a responsible manner.

Linking Schools to Community Services

This is why my Department will work with the Surgeon General to explore ways to develop a stronger link between schools and community mental health facilities as well as to increase the number of school counselors and other staff who can reach out to children and families. Many states, including California, are moving in this direction.

The principal at Thurston High School, in Springfield, Oregon, acknowledged in the aftermath of that tragedy that he had only four counselors for 1,700 students. We simply aren't going to connect with our young people as individuals when the average counselor in an American school is responsible for over 500 children.

We want to make sure that important support staff in our nation's schools -- the social workers, counselors and school psychologists -- are not solely focused on testing and evaluation but also are directing their expertise to preventing violence. The 1997 revisions of IDEA will give school psychologists a greater opportunity to actively work with you, the safe and drug-free school coordinators.

We also need to look outside of the schoolhouse to find new resources and bring them into the school environment. Teachers cannot be policemen, social workers or psychiatrists. Teachers may be the first to know a child well enough to see that the child is troubled, but then they need to know that there is a support team available to them. I want to point out that 5 percent of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is available for these types of collaborative and coordinate services.

Crisis Management

We also have to realize that the type of tragic incidents such as those in Springfield and Jonesboro can happen any time and at any school. This is why the Department of Education and the Department of Justice will develop a model for "crisis management" that can be used by schools to develop their own plans. This may be particularly helpful for smaller school districts.

Alternative Schools

As we reach out to our young people, we must send them a strong and consistent message that they must be held accountable for their actions. They need to understand that there are very real consequences to breaking the rules. This is why we must continue to be tough minded about expelling young people who bring guns and other weapons to school.

But we simply cannot expel young people into the streets. A child who brings a weapon to school needs to be properly evaluated and a plan of action has to be developed to turn this young person's life around. I remain very concerned by the finding that only 56 percent of the students expelled under the Gun Free Schools Act were placed in alternative settings. This is why the Department of Education will undertake a major new study of alternative schools and examine other ways that will enable us to make sure that these young people in trouble get their lives turned

around.

Guns and Children

Finally, a last important point: Unsupervised gun use and children do not mix. I will say that again. Unsupervised gun use and children do not mix. If Charlton Heston and the NRA want to come into the "mainstream of American political debate" then they need to stop defining themselves as "victims of media manipulation" and help keep our children from becoming the victims of gun violence in our schools, in our homes and in our streets. I challenge the NRA to direct its attention to getting guns out of the hands of unsupervised children. The link between guns in a house and children being injured or killed in an accidental shooting or committing suicide is well established and alarming.

Last year, at the request of the President and the Attorney General, eight major gun manufacturers agreed to put trigger locks on all new guns now being manufactured. But there are still over 200 million guns in America that need to be locked up as well.

This is why I ask every adult to get serious about gun safety in America. If you have guns in your house, please take the responsibility for making sure that every gun has a child safety lock on it. It's not enough to say it was a mistake because a gun got left in an unlocked drawer or on the nightstand by the bed and a child got killed. Unsupervised gun use and children -- do not mix.

The action steps that I have just outlined are comprehensive because this is the only way we are going to help our young people. America's young people are resilient. They will have a bright future if we help them turn away from the culture of violence and drugs that this society tolerates all too easily.

There is another way for America. That is to have a total commitment to reconnecting with America's young people and to help each school become a place of hope, learning and opportunity. When communities come together -- parents, senior citizens, faith communities, business leaders and just plain folk -- when we rally around our schools and when we reconnect with our children, good things happen.

I want to end now by telling you about my visit to Jonesboro, Arkansas. The President was in Africa, so he asked the Attorney General and me to represent him at the memorial service. We had the opportunity to visit with the families of the victims and to listen to a community come together in the aftermath of a terrible act of violence.

One of the most powerful speakers that night -- a real heroine to the community -- was Karen Curtner, the very fine principal of Westside Middle School. I shall never forget her words.

She said that our hearts have four physical parts and four emotional parts -- sorrow, compassion, forgiveness and hope. She urged us -- and these are her words -- to start a chain of love that would change the world, one helping hand at a time, whether it's checking on a neighbor, reading an extra bedtime story to a child, or simply saying thank you more often. Her message is my message -- a message of reconnection and hope.

Thank you.

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